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ABSTRACT

While it is appreciated that research on many of the details of early language learning is still required, one of the main themes of this paper is that solutions to the major problems of beginning reading are already known. In general, there has been a sufficiency of research, and what is now needed is action to implement the results already obtained. This action is needed in three areas: in helping to make good the severe deficiencies in oracy that exist in so many children before they come to school; in ensuring that teachers, both at the initial level and in service, are given better training in teaching beginners to read and are made aware of the results that research has already supplied; and in ensuring that steps are taken without delay to draw the attention of all concerned with education to the problems that are caused by using traditional orthography to teach beginners to read and to encourage the use of proven alternatives. (Author/WR)

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EVIDENCE SUBMITTED TO THE BULLOCK COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO READING AND THE USE OF ENGLISH

D. A. Pidgeon

Introduction

In the evidence submitted here it is taken as axiomatic that a child's learning to speak, read and write his own mother-tongue is the most important element in his education. It is considered the right of every child that he should learn to read at an early age and that the obstacles which now prevent this from happening should be removed. While the aim, therefore, is 100% literacy, it is argued that literacy (reading and writing) is primarily dependent upon oracy (listening and speaking). It is also argued that research over the past 10 to 20 years has indicated solutions to many of the obstacles to achieving full literacy, but that the dissemination of the results of this research has been slow and insufficient and little positive action taken to implement its recommendations.

The many factors which influence a child's learning to read in this country can be conveniently ordered into three groups: those concerned with the development of language competence in the child's home background; those associated with the teacher and with teaching and learning in the classroom; and those resulting from the irregularities and inconsistencies in the spelling and pronunciation of the English language. These three groups are not unrelated, but much existing confusion can be dispersed by considering them as separate issues.

These groups are discussed in more detail below. The order chosen is deliberate. The development of oracy and the factors associated with it almost certainly come first in importance, for without a reasonable competency in the understanding and use of speech, no child can learn to read[1]; it is also an area which has been very largely neglected in the past and hence is one where most immediate and determined action needs to be taken. A discussion of the role of the teacher is placed second, for outside the home and the immediate environment in which the child spends his pre-school years, the teacher is the central figure influencing his learning. The teacher, too, has been involved in most of the many research studies carried out on reading, yet, despite this, there is a widespread ignorance among teachers of the research findings and little action to implement them has been taken. The difficulties arising from the medium used to teach reading are discussed last, not because they necessarily occupy this position in terms of importance but because

[1] A more detailed definition of "oracy" is given below. To avoid misunderstandings, it should be made clear that there is no implication here that deaf or dumb children cannot learn to read. Some do so, but with difficulty.

this is an area where the results of research are most clear cut and where action to produce positive results can most swiftly and easily be taken.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

The word "oracy" in this paper is used to have an analogous meaning for listening and speaking that literacy has for reading and writing. Like literacy—the ability to read and write, oracy—the ability to listen (with, of course, understanding) and speak implies a continuum from no ability at one end to high ability at the other, and, as with literacy, the point at which oracy may be said to be achieved is purely arbitrary. Most children learn to speak during the first three or four years of their life—before they start school or even enter a nursery class or pre-school play group. Subsequently they may improve their ability to structure their spoken language and increase their vocabulary, but it is in the home, i.e. outside the usual influence of educators that the fundamentals of language learning are developed.

The point to be stressed is that there are wide variations in this time pattern. Some children are fluent talkers, having an implicit understanding of language structure and a sizeable vocabulary before they reach their third birthday. At the other end of the scale, however, there are many children whose speech is virtually confined to single word utterances even when they first go to school at five years of age. A great deal is known about the development of language from studies of children's talk[2], although, for the most part, the subjects of such studies have been the children of professional families. While they have revealed something of the stages through which children pass in learning to talk, a somewhat false impression is inevitably given not only of the rate of development but of the part played by the nature and quality of the home background in that development.

A reasonable standard of oracy will easily be achieved if an appropriate linguistic environment is provided and encouragement is given by the other adults and older children in a child's home, but there are many homes where such environment and encouragement are lacking. Oracy, as defined here to include an understanding of the structure of language as well as the ability to use it in speech, is not easy to measure; hence most researchers in this area have been forced to use surrogates such as the number of books in the home and the time that parents spend with their children. These surrogates can be assumed to correlate far from perfectly with oracy, but they at least indicate the extent of the problem. The Plowden Survey revealed, for example, that 29% of homes had

[2] An excellent summary of work in this field can be found in *Language and Learning* by James Britton, Penguin Press, 1970.

five or less books in them, and approximately half the mothers and one-third of the fathers could only occasionally or not at all spend any time with their children in the evenings. It is always noticeable that in instances like this, the figures appear worse for those in the lower socio-economic groups. In the Plowden Survey, 16% of mothers from social class V (Unskilled) had no free time at all to spend with their children in the evenings compared with 9% in class I (Professional).

There exists, therefore, a not inconsiderable proportion of homes in which a child may receive very little, if any, opportunity or help in his language development. Britton[3] points out that there are two problems that face the infant learning his mother-tongue; that of "resolving the stream of spoken sound into segments with meaning" and that of "the endless stream of undifferentiated experience". For Britton, "it is the way these two tasks enmesh that explains how a child is able to perform his astonishing feat of learning". When the life experiences of the child are many and varied, when the stream of spoken sound is well organised and co-ordinated and when there is help and encouragement from the parents, the feat must be difficult enough; but if the experiences are lacking, if the spoken sounds are both restricted and unstructured and if there is little understanding and help forthcoming, it is not to be wondered that development in listening is severely limited, and development in speech slow to begin.

The lack of oracy in children coming from linguistically disadvantaged homes is a problem which demands attention in its own right. The fact that oracy is a necessary prerequisite of literacy both magnifies the problem and adds a sense of urgency to it. That little action has been taken to overcome the problem would appear to stem from the fact that, even where there has been an awareness of it, it has been regarded purely in educational terms and therefore to be solved within the main school system. Indeed, until very recently, any attempt to introduce cognitive learning into Nursery schools and classes has been met with stout resistance. Even in infant schools, there are many teachers who, not having been trained to any awareness of the problem, have not appreciated that children with a linguistic deficiency are largely unable to learn language simply by listening to others. Such teachers have made no conscious effort to help them, and indeed, they may well have tried to teach them to read and perhaps been disheartened by their failure to succeed.

Oracy is an educational problem; but it is also a social one. Moreover, since learning to speak should normally occur before the age of three or four, it is one requiring action before the majority of children ever get to school. This means that the first priority ought to be directed

[3] Britton, J., op. cit. p. 37.

at the child in his home, and that, in default, special efforts should be made during the first years at school to remedy the deficiencies as far as possible. Four possible lines of action are discussed briefly below.

Training in Parenthood

The importance of early learning (from birth to five years) in both the cognitive and effective aspects of human development has now been demonstrated by a great deal of research work. Bloom[4], talks of "the tremendous power of early learning and its resistance to later alteration or extinction". Certainly in our modern civilisation there can be no more complex and difficult task for man to perform than the rearing of another human. Yet it is a task for which the minimum of instruction is given. It is true that some secondary schools do include in their curriculum courses which deal with aspects of the physical handling and well-being of new-born babies, and similar short courses are arranged in ante-natal clinics for expectant mothers. But, for the most part, knowledge about the psychological and social development of young children is totally neglected and what is practised has either been passed on from mother to daughter, or gleaned, often inaccurately, from books, magazines and newspapers.

The suggestion is made here that every school should be encouraged to give both boys and girls in their final school years courses dealing with parent-child relationships, stressing particularly the importance of language in the intellectual development of children. It is not sufficient to leave such courses for the further education sector. The very pupils who need the instruction most are those who tend to drop out of education at the earliest opportunity. Psychology is now being introduced in some secondary schools, but usually only as an acadamic subject for the more able pupils. What is required is a more practical introduction to bringing up children with the language aspects stressed by illustrative films, demonstrations and discussions.

There would also seem to be no reason why courses instructing expectant mothers in the art of talking to their babies should not be arranged by local authorities at ante-natal clinics. In this modern age, too, every endeavour should be made to encourage fathers to receive similar instruction.

Use of Television

While the parents must play a major role in the language development of their children, even if they could devote enough time for personal interaction with their babies, by no means all of them could

[4] Bloom, B. S. *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*, p. 216. John Wiley, New York, 1964.

supply either the wide range of experiences or provide the kind of expertise that is really required. Yet exactly the right kind of experiences and expertise can readily be made available in nearly every home in the country through the medium of television.

It must be remembered that the concern is not with children whose home and parents already supply the necessary background for the development of language competence, but with those that are in this particular area somewhat disadvantaged. Descriptive programmes which assume a certain level of oracy to be understood are of no educative value whatever, no matter how interesting their content may appear to be. Equally useless are programmes whose educational content is directed more to children from relatively well-informed homes than to those with an impoverished background. To be effective the programmes must first appeal to the intended viewer and, second, have a content that will make the desired educational impact upon him.

There can be no denying that very young children like to watch television. Indeed, if the programme content is right, a relationship can be set up between the child and the set which is almost as personal as that which can be established with a live teacher, particularly if the child is free to switch on or off. If the programme is interesting and appealing an hour or more is not too long, and repetitions are welcomed, not rejected. To appeal to the intended viewer, the programmes must be fast moving and containing plenty of action and variety. Children like to watch other children and animals, and they especially enjoy puppets and animation of all kinds[3].

Not until the advent of Sesame Street in the United States had any programme for young children appeared which fulfilled, in any degree, requirements of this kind. Sesame Street broke new ground in that it was designed deliberately to appeal to the disadvantaged child (although it is by no means rejected by those more fortunately placed) and with the intention of providing the stimulus for him to become more competent in his understanding and his use of language in expression. There was no overt indication of teaching. As Catherine Stott said in THE GUARDIAN, "By applying the fast-moving advertising technique to learning, it subtly deploys its ready-mix of monster puppets, animated cartoons and songs with such carefully calculated spontaneity that I would defy the brightest child to guess that the hidden persuader is none other than that well-known brand name 'Education'."

Sesame Street was designed with specific objectives in mind and,

[3] Children will sit enthralled through more than two hours at a Circus or Pantomime. It is a mistake to apply theories concerning the length of attention span to activities in which the keenness of the child to attend is highly motivated and the units of interest quickly changing.

indeed, carefully planned evaluation by the Educational Testing Service has clearly demonstrated that these objectives are being achieved. While it can be criticised on a number of small points, it undoubtedly is serving an extremely useful function and making, by comparison, such BBC pre-school programmes as "Watch with Mother", "Play School" and "Jackanory" relatively incomprehensible and therefore educationally useless, at any rate for those children who are deficient in language, and for those for whom the need is greatest.

Sesame Street has proved that education can be fun and that it is possible to use the medium of television to help make up that deficiency of language ability that has been a contributory cause of the failure of so many children learning to read. It is strongly recommended that more programmes of this kind be produced and shown regularly in this country.

Language Programmes in Nursery Schools and Classes

Normally, children under five years of age in this country gather their life experiences and develop their ability to use language in their homes and immediate neighbourhood. Increasingly, however, more children between three and five are attending Nursery schools or classes, and the lobby to spend more of the Education Budget on early schooling is a strong one. But more nursery schooling as it exists at the moment is not sufficient, because the tradition of these schools, originating in the pioneer work of Rachel McMillan and Susan Isaacs, has been a concern for the emotional development of the child with an emphasis on activity in largely unstructured situations. The late Stephen Wiseman questioned the usefulness of such a programme for remedying the language deficiencies of the disadvantaged child[8]:

> "It is an admirable programme for a middle-class child from a tidy suburb, providing him with the activities and opportunities denied to him at home, but most of which are commonplace to the footloose and fancy-free youngster from the slums with little or no parent supervision. It is no doubt true that with such a regime the deprived child's vocabulary is likely to increase somewhat, particularly in its store of nouns. But how important is this? As one investigator has pointed out, ignorance of the meaning of 'sheep' or 'elephant' is unlikely to prove a lasting educational handicap. Ignorance of the meaning and function of such words as 'if', 'but', 'or', 'because', 'since', 'when', is a much more serious matter. And experience shows that appre-

[8] Wiseman, S. *The Educational Obstacle Race: Factors that Hinder Pupil Progress*. Address given to the Members' Conference of the N.F.E.R., 1970.

ciation and command of language structure cannot safely be left to chance, under the stimulus of free play and activity methods. What is required is a planned and graded attack, using a language programme specially devised to meet the known deficiencies of the disadvantaged child."

Reference has already been made to the resistance offered by Nursery schools to the possible introduction of planned language programmes. This point was also discussed by Wiseman in reference to the Pre-School Research Project of the N.F.E.R. Having quoted some opinions expressed by nursery school teachers to the structured language programmes being used with disadvantaged children he says:

> "It is true that much of the criticism derives from the fact that the programme in common use is American in origin[7], and that apart from the chauvinistic reaction to an educational import, it is less than satisfactory in content and approach for British children. But it is also clear that here we have a strong rejection by many teachers of *any* alteration in the traditional approach to nursery education. The strength of feeling and depth of emotional response is often more appropriate to religious controversy than to educational practice. Educational philosophy has become educational dogma. Rachel McMillan and Susan Isaacs, both responsive to new ideas and concepts, both basing their teaching on the newest developments in educational thought, must be turning in their graves. How can the training courses of these teachers have left them so inflexible, so unresponsive to new insights? The educational world is changing around them, but they remain encapsulated within the shell of holy writ[8]."

It is clear that determined efforts to change the attitudes of present nursery school teachers must be made, preferably by an official declaration showing support for the introduction of language programmes consciously structured to achieve the desired end. The fact that as yet no suitable set of materials has been developed specifically for use in this country should not be taken as a reason for further delay, but immediate steps to remedy this situation should be taken.

The success of any nursery school language programme will clearly depend upon both the skill and enthusiasm of the teacher in using them. Experience in the United States, and so far in this country, would suggest that it is their application to small groups (not exceeding 8-9 children at

[7] *The George Peabody Language Development Kit*. N.F.E.R. Publishing Company, Windsor, Berks.
[8] ibid.

the most, so that all children can be actively engaged and not be merely passive watchers and listeners) that is of prime importance. To bring this about, when class sizes often exceed 20, requires some reorganisation; but since the programmes only occupy one hour or less each day, this is by no means impossible.

The importance of these structured language programmes cannot be overstressed, but they cannot alone replace the more constant verbal interaction which can take place between mother and child, teacher and child, and child and child. To achieve even greater success, therefore, nursery schools must extend their activities to involve also the mothers as much as possible, so that the work in the schools can be carried over into the homes. This, unfortunately, is no easy task, for endeavours by schools to attract parents to meetings are inevitably responded to by the "wrong" parent—those that really need help tend to be apathetic and rarely attend voluntarily. Perhaps this calls for a greater degree of co-operation between teachers and social workers.

Training of Infant and Junior Teachers

The problem of lack of oracy is an immediate one. It is believed that the suggestions made above, if acted upon quickly, will go some way to reducing the number of children coming to full-time schooling at five unable to speak with any degree of competence. There are, however, very many children at present attending infant schools with severe language deficiencies*, and it will certainly be some years before the full effect of language programmes given by television, nursery schools and parents can begin to be felt. It is clear, therefore, that some action must be taken at once by infant and even junior school teachers.

There are, of course, a number of teachers in these schools coping admirably with this problem at the present time. But until other action begins to take effect, the number of children in need of instruction may well increase and there are a great many other teachers who are not merely unappreciative of the difficulties faced by these disadvantaged children, but they have received little or no training in the appropriate remedial action to be taken. It is imperative, therefore, that special in-service training courses should be organised without delay, not only to provide a greater awareness of the problem and the necessary action required to overcome it within the classroom, but also to demonstrate the importance of involving parents in the language development programmes and to give instruction in the means of helping to bring this about.

* Dr. Kellmer Pringle reports in *Ten Thousand Seven-year Olds* that 21.4% of her sample were deficient in "oral ability", unable to "use simple word groupings".

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

If oracy is a necessary prerequisite of literacy it is certainly not a sufficient one. Achieving a reasonable level of language competence does not mean that the skills of reading and writing will automatically be acquired. There are, of course, a number of children who will learn to read even before they start school, and others who will learn in school almost despite the efforts of the teacher; but for the vast majority, even when they have achieved the necessary degree of understanding of language structure, the skills and enthusiasm of the teachers play an indispensable part.

The importance of the teacher in teaching children to read has never been questioned. Yet, surprisingly enough, the vast majority of researches carried out on children's reading have been mainly concerned with the ways in which the methods, materials and procedures[10] employed have influenced reading performance, and the teacher has only entered into the studies as a variable it has been necessary to control. Even accepting the fact that teachers varied in their ability to teach, few investigators have attempted to examine for possible interaction effects between teacher and method or material, and even fewer have sought to study those specific activities of the teacher which may have contributed to their pupils learning to read, irrespective of method or procedure[11].

If direct research evidence is lacking, views and opinions about the teacher's role are not. Southgate, for example, discussing possible different approaches to reading, concludes: "I have suggested that a new approach[12] is not necessarily the answer to all reading problems. It may well be that the teacher is more important than either the reading

[10] These words are used here with the same definitions as those given by Southgate, V.—"Formulae for Beginning Reading Tuition" in *Educational Research* XI, 23-30. *Methods* largely distinguishes "look and say" from "phonic": *Materials* describes supplementary books, apparatus, games, pictures, charts, etc., and *Procedures* includes types of pupil grouping, formality of pupil/teacher relationship, degree of emphasis on additional activities and use made of materials. As will be mentioned later, the *Medium* which these three must necessarily employ is essentially different.

[11] Morris, J. M., in *Standards and Progress in Reading*, N.F.E.R., 1966, did attempt to obtain measure of the "teachers' contribution". Subjective assessments of such attributes as "effort made to improve material classroom conditions", "beliefs about the acquisition of reading skills" and "suitability of reading practice" were made. Her analyses showed that a clear association existed between "good" and "bad" teachers and "good" and "bad" schools and pupils.

[12] In passing, it may be worth noting that Southgate, who has noticeably maintained the important distinction between the medium used by teachers and pupils and the teacher's "method", "procedure" or "approach" is here omitting "medium". Even a new medium, however, is not "necessarily the answer to all reading problems".

materials or the method[13]." It is not that there is any doubt about the truth of this statement, but it does raise questions about the qualities which make the difference between a "good" and a "bad" teacher of reading.

A number of studies have attempted to disentangle from the multitude of other factors the ways in which teachers make a difference to pupils' achievement in general. The results of survey research have not been particularly helpful. The two major findings appear to be (i) that the quantitative models so far developed for research of this kind have not permitted a true estimation of teacher effects considered independently of the influence of other home and school factors, and (ii) that measures of teacher *behaviour* are more effective in predicting student performance than information on qualifications and experience[14]. This latter finding was confirmed in the Plowden Survey where Peaker showed that "among the school variables of which we took notice the most important appeared to be the quality of the teaching" as assessed by HMI's[15].

Specific research into teacher behaviour has also as yet been singularly lacking in demonstrating *how* teachers make a difference. While experimental research aimed at studying the act of teaching, and classroom investigations directed at improving the efficiency of teachers, are both giving promising leads for future work, no single factor has as yet been isolated of which it could be said that it was clearly and directly associated with improvement in pupil learning[16 & 17].

[13] Southgate, V.—"Selecting an Approach to Teaching Reading" in *The Second International Reading Symposium*, Downing, J. and Brown, A. L. (eds.), (Cassell, London. 1967).

[14] See *Do Teachers Make a Difference?* U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1970.

[15] Peaker, G. F. Appendix 4, Vol. II, *Children and Their Primary Schools*. London, H.M.S.O. 1967.

[16] Rosenshine, B. *Teacher Behaviour and Student Achievement*. Slough, N.F.E.R. 1971, and "New Directions for Research on Teaching" in *How Teachers Make a Difference* U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1971.

[17] The nearest approach to any indication of such a factor for improving the efficiency of teachers is supplied by No. 12 of *The Main Advantages of i.t.a.* given on page 153 of Warburton, F. W. and Southgate V.—*i.t.a.: An Independent Evaluation*. John Murray and W. & R. Chambers, London. 1969: "Teachers also rated it as an advantage that the introduction of i.t.a. has stirred up a great interest in reading among themselves; attendances at lectures and conferences, as well as staffroom discussions have contributed to an increase in teachers' own understanding of children's learning, with a consequent increase in their teaching proficiency. This view was supported by headteachers, local advisers and other visitors to schools, who also noted particularly an improvement in the proficiency of less able and less experienced teachers when they use i.t.a. rather than T.O."

On the more positive side, however, a number of research studies have been carried out in recent years which have supported the view that the attitudes of teachers—and the classroom practices they adopt as a result—are more important in determining pupil outcomes than the more material factors such as school buildings, size of class and the textbooks or apparatus provided. It was the teachers in *non-streamed* schools holding *streaming* attitudes whose pupils came out worst in the Barker-Lunn study[18]: similarly, failure was the greatest for those pupils in the Burstall study[19] whose teachers believed that they were incapable of learning French.

These and other studies[20] have demonstrated that the beliefs and attitudes of teachers can exert a profound influence on the kind and level of performance they are led to expect from their pupils. Wiseman[21] puts great emphasis on this point:

> "If I were to be asked to specify the single most significant outcome of educational research in the last decade, I think I could select just this one; the power of teacher attitude and teacher expectation. . . . We must come to grips with the certainty that different levels of (pupil) motivation can make nonsense of predictions based on the results of cognitive tests, and that the pupil's energy and drive, his ambitions and aspirations, his response to difficulty and challenge, can be profoundly affected—for good or ill—by the teacher's underlying philosophy and beliefs."

These research findings about teacher attitudes and expectations have a particular significance at this present time. Of course teachers must believe in what they are doing if they really hope to be successful. They must look beyond the methods they use, the gimmicks and gadgetry they employ, and examine very closely their beliefs and attitudes—particularly perhaps about the limited level of success they may have come to expect from "low ability" pupils. The notion that because *aptitude* for a subject—i.e. inherited ability—is normally distributed in the population it must necessarily follow that *achievement* must also be distributed the same way, dies hard, especially since, in practice, achievement is generally found to *be* normally distributed, and inevitably relatively high correlations are found between measures of aptitude (or intelligence) and

[18] Barker Lunn, J. C. *Streaming in the Primary School*, N.F.E.R., Slough, 1970.
[19] Burstall, C. *French in the Primary School*, Slough, N.F.E.R., 1970.
[20] See Pidgeon, D. A. *Expectation and Pupil Performance*, Slough, N.F.E.R., 1970.
[21] ibid.

achievement. Bloom[22] and his co-workers have clearly demonstrated, however, that there is a fallacy in the reasoning here, and that teaching towards a specified criterion (Mastery Learning) can in fact produce distributions of achievement with highly pronounced negative skews.[23]

Beyond this, however, the movement towards child-centred education and the change to the more progressive informal school can also spell danger. "Open plan", "integrated day", "individualised instruction" and "informal approach" are catch phrases very much in vogue. What they imply may well be the basis of good modern education, but many pupils will be doomed to suffer if these ideas are simply regarded by teachers as bandwagons to jump on without accepting first the radical attitudinal changes so necessary for their success.

In the case of reading in particular, the acceptance of a modern informal approach may lead teachers to the belief that, provided they surround young children with books and other reading materials and games (i.e. place them in a "learning situation") they will somehow automatically learn to read in their own time. There are indeed those who argue that too much emphasis is placed on reading anyway, and that to learn too soon may result in an aversion to it.[24] Research, however, gives the lie to this view. The major finding from the studies carried out by the NFER[25] comparing successful and unsuccessful schools, was that in the latter there was a lack of systematic teaching of reading; there were few set periods of instruction, a considerable neglect of phonics and much less control over the children's learning exerted by the teacher. Activity methods were pursued *at the expense* of organised learning. The attitudes of the Heads strongly influenced the atmosphere in the schools; the successful being firmer and less indulgent, without being harshly authoritarian. The more permissive attitudes in the unsuccessful schools appeared ambiguous; while showing more "sympathy" for the children, some teachers tended to be condescending in their attitudes and underestimated their pupils' abilities, thus depressing achievement.

The need for the active involvement of teachers is supported by Southgate. Accepting the fact that the brighter and more advantaged children will learn to read anyway, she says: "Yet I am certain that many other children will fail to learn to read in infant classes unless a good deal of

[22] Bloom, B. S., Hastings, J. T. and Madus, G. F. *Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1971.

[23] Block, J. H. (ed.) *Mastery Learning: Theory and Practice*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc. New York, 1971.

[24] Clegg, Sir Alec, "Hysteria over Reading" in *Times Educational Supplement*, 14th April, 1972.

[25] Goodacre, E. J. *Reading in Infant Classes*. N.F.E.R., Slough, 1967, and Cane, B. and Smithers, J. *The Roots of Reading*, N.F.E.R., Slough, 1971.

guidance and instruction is undertaken by the teacher. There are some children who would be neither 'motivated' nor 'ready' by the time they were eight or nine or ten, if someone did not do something about it."[26] The danger is not that children will develop an aversion to reading if they learn too soon, but that delay will not only deny for them the sheer enjoyment that reading can bring and close the doors to other learning, but that it must create such permanent damage to their own self-image that their chances of future success diminish rapidly and they are often forced to choose the only alternative known to them—to opt out of the learning situation, and possibly out of society itself.

The importance of the teacher in teaching children to read can hardly be denied. What is perhaps extraordinary about the situation is that the result of research and the proclamations of experts have largely been ignored for almost two decades. Summarising Joyce Morris's work in the mid-fifties, Cox[27] says:

> ". . . it seems reasonable to predict with some certainty that there would be far fewer backward readers in our junior schools if teachers tackled reading difficulties more systematically than they do at present."

> "This is not to decry the work done by teachers throughout the country in alleviating the reading problem. But it is a startling fact that backward readers are a sadly underprivileged group, and that, by and large, their problems receive scant attention and their teachers are ill-equipped by their training or circumstances to deal with them."

The truth would seem to be that *there really is no reading problem*—only, regrettably, a lack of willingness, enterprise or enthusiasm on the part of those in authority to put into effect the known solutions. There are undoubtedly many teachers performing near miracles with the most unpromising of material, but there are also many others so completely ignorant of even the basic findings of research or the publications of experienced teachers, that some surprise might be expressed that the amount of reading failure in schools is not greater. Some teachers will have received bad or indifferent initial training; others, having had the task of teaching beginners thrust upon them, may have had no training

[26] Southgate, V. "The Importance of Structure in Beginning Reading" in *Reading Skills: Theory and Practice*. Gardner, K. (ed.) Ward Lock. 1970.
[27] Cox, M. *The Challenge of Reading Failure*, N.F.E.R., Slough, 1968.

at all[28]; certainly very few will have taken any worthwhile in-service course in recent years.

The implications are clear; more and better training in the teaching of reading is required—and not only for those teachers destined for infant schools. While research will continue and the possibility that some new idea for teaching reading may yet appear, it is more than likely that knowledge of the media, methods, materials and procedures required for teaching even the most difficult or backward child is already available. But this knowledge alone is not enough. Training—whether initial or in-service—should emphasise the importance of teacher attitudes and how they can influence pupil motivation.

Southgate places great store on what she calls a "reading drive"—"a new surge of inspiration through the teaching of the subject."[29] She describes many factors which may trigger off the "drive"—new schemes, new books, new apparatus, etc. There is no doubt that, like the well-known Hawthorne effect, a reading drive can produce real and significant results. The only criticism to be made is that nothing remains new for very long and young children soon learn to accommodate themselves to a changed situation. But there is no reason why the idea behind the reading drive—the "surge of inspiration"—should not be continuous. This, however, is clearly a matter of installing the right attitudes to reading in the teacher in the first place.

It is also important that teachers are trained to accept the fact that learning to read does not stop once the child "is on his own"—that is, able to make reasonably fluent progress when presented with a new story book. Reading should be a subject in the curriculum of all schools, including secondary. Learning how to read for enjoyment and how to read in order to gather information; knowing what to read and where

[28] It is interesting to note that in her Kent Studies carried out in 1954-1957, Joyce Morris (*Reading in the Primary School*, Newnes, London, 1959) found about 45% of children entering junior schools at 7 "still needed the kind of teaching associated with the infant school"; yet 75% of first-year junior teachers had no training in infant methods and 52% had no infant school experience. Now, more than 15 years later, because no *action* was taken, the position would seem to be very little different. (i) "Only one in eight junior teachers has received specific training in reading techniques . . ." I.L.E.A. Literacy Survey, 1967-69. (ii) "To my knowledge, hundreds of head teachers and many inspectors would testify to how ill-prepared newly qualified teachers generally are for their basic task of developing reading skills." Joyce Morris: Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on Education and Science, House of Commons, 4th March, 1970. (iii) "The majority of probationer teachers considered that they were ill prepared for their task by their training in Colleges of Education." W. K. Gardner. ibid.

[29] Southgate, V. "Approaching i.t.a. Results with Caution" in *Educational Research*, 783-96, 1965.

to get the right books; and above all, building up an interest and an enthusiasm for reading, just do not come to all children without some instruction, stimulus and persuasion by a teacher, and these must be implanted in the teacher during training.

THE MEDIUM THROUGH WHICH READING IS TAUGHT

It is a well-known fact that English is a comparatively easy language to learn, at least as far as the everyday spoken form of it is concerned. This is largely because, in comparison with such languages as French, German, Russian, Greek, and many others, it has a relatively simple grammatical structure. There is no inflection for gender, case or number on the articles; there is a lack of gender, apart from that which is natural, in nouns and, with few exceptions, the plural is very simply formed; there is an absence of inflection on adjectives, and the verbal forms in different tenses are, for the most part, relatively simple.

In view of this, it is undoubtedly surprising that, compared with children in many other countries, such a high proportion in England have difficulties in learning to read. Wijk[30] states:

> "It has been estimated that it takes an English-speaking child from one to two years longer to learn to read and write his language than it takes the children of other nations to achieve similar results in their language."

He refers to the relatively large numbers of backward readers quoted in England[31] and America,[32] and continues:

> "There can be no doubt whatever that this regrettable state of affairs is mainly due to the confused and antiquated spelling system and not, for example, to unsuitable methods of teaching.[33]"

In view of what has been said in the previous two sections of this paper, this is somewhat of an over-statement. Nevertheless, it emphasises a difficulty that English children have in learning to read and write that is apparently not present in many other countries.

Possibly because of the difficulties involved, it would seem that no *empirical* studies comparing children's learning to read in different

[30] Wijk, A. "Regularized English" in *Alphabets for English*. Haas, W. (ed.) Manchester University Press, 1969.
[31] *Progress in Reading*. D.E.S. Education Pamphlet No. 50. H.M.S.O., London, 1966.
[32] Flesch, R. *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Harper Row, New York, 1955.
[33] Wijk, A., op. cit.

languages have been carried out. Lee[34] contacted more than thirty countries, chiefly European, but was unable to compare the "regularity" of a language and reading success, nor could he establish any close association between "regularity" and the methods used to teach reading. This was largely because the few names of reading-instruction methods were variously used, there was little agreement as to what constituted good or bad reading, achievement (however defined) was not measured and spelling regularity had never been the subject of reading research. He was able to conclude, however, that "by comparison with English, the languages of the countries mentioned are regularly spelt".

In languages in which there is a reasonable correspondence between the printed word and the spoken word, the spelling of the printed word does not seem to constitute a serious problem to the learner of reading, and it would appear that children learn to read more quickly than they do in England. In Italian, for example, the Director General of Ministero della Pubblica Instruzione is quoted as saying[35]:

> "We do not have the problem to which you refer, because the rules for pronouncing the Italian language are simple and easily learned. Therefore, children who are not disturbed in mind and/or character learn to read correctly during the first year of school."

Again, in the debate on the second reading of the Spelling Reform Bill[36], Professor Savory (Queen's University, Belfast) said:

> "The young Spaniard who is learning his mother tongue, once he knows the significance of each letter and what sound each letter indicates, can read and write the language with the utmost facility, and I strongly believe the calculations that have been made that the Spanish child has a gain over the unfortunate English child, condemned to the torture of this illogical spelling, of at least two years."

Evidence that the irregularities and inconsistencies in the spelling and pronunciation of the English language is a major cause of reading (and writing) difficulties, is not confined to comparisons with other languages. Concern with the limitations of the 26-letter roman alphabet to represent the 40 or so sounds of English, has been expressed by many people. Pitman and St. John[37] review four centuries of proposed innovations

[34] Lee, W. R. *Spelling Irregularity and Reading Difficulty in English*. N.F.E.R., London, 1960.
[35] Quoted in *Optional Spellings*, Spring 1972 issue. Palm Springs, U.S.A.
[36] Hansard, 11th March, 1949.
[37] Pitman, Sir James and St. John, J. *Alphabets and Reading*. Pitmans, London, 1969.

directed at improving the learning of reading in English by reforming the spelling of the printed word, although the attempt to introduce reform for the sole purpose of initial learning, with the intention that the proposed changes should be abandoned once the child had attained an appropriate degree of reading fluency, is relatively recent. Schemes recently suggested for this purpose have either retained the existing alphabet unchanged, but have introduced aids to a reliable system of word decoding and encoding through the addition of diacritical marks (e.g. Fry[38], Johnson[39]) or the use of colour in some form (e.g. Gattegno[40], Jones[41] and Bleasdale[42]), or they have augmented the existing Latin alphabet by adding characters in order to regularise the spelling rules (e.g. i.t.a.), or they have employed a system of 18 digraphs made up from 23 lower-case characters retained from the present alphabet to form discrete symbols for the 18 sounds not covered by the 23[43].

The advantages and disadvantages of using some form of regularised medium for the beginning stages of learning to read have been summarised by Southgate and Roberts[44]. Like many of the suggested schemes themselves, their summary consists largely of a set of unverified hypotheses, since, with the exception of i.t.a.[45], few empirical studies have been carried out to test the efficiency of the innovations. The studies that have been carried out show unequivocally that learning to read *in* Traditional Orthography is *not* the best way to learn to read Traditional Orthography[46]. Southgate has undertaken a comparative analysis of colour codes with i.t.a.[47], reaching the conclusion:

[38] Fry, E. B. "A Diacritical Marking System to aid beginning Reading Instruction". *Elementary English* 41, 5th May, 1964.

[39] Johnson, H. *The Sound Way to Correct Spelling*. (Three Graded Spelling Books based on a Phonic Approach), Longman. London.

[40] Gattegno, C. "Words in Colour System". *Forward Trends* VII 4, The Guild of Teachers of Backward Children. London, 1964.

[41] Jones, J. K. *Colour Story Reading*. Nelson, London, 1967.

[42] Bleasdale, E. & W. *Reading by Rainbow*. Moor Platt Press. Bolton, 1966.

[43] Phonemic Spelling Council (formerly Simplified Spelling Association of America). *World English Spelling*. Lake Placid Club, New York, 1971.

[44] Southgate, V. and Roberts, G. R. *Reading—Which Approach?* U.L.P. London. 1970.

[45] Up to the present time over 80 studies using control groups have compared i.t.a. and T.O.-taught children. Over two-thirds have demonstrated the superiority of i.t.a. on a variety of measures. None has produced consistent results in favour of T.O. See Block, J. R., *i.t.a. Status Report*. The i.t.a. Foundation Inc., Hofstra University, New York, 1971.

[46] The one possible exception is Brimer, M. A., "An Experimental Evaluation of Coded Scripts in Initial Reading", in *New Research in Education*. N.F.E.R., 1967. This was a rather artificially conducted experiment concentrating on word recognition only.

[47] Southgate, V. "Comparing colour codes with i.t.a." in *Reading and the Curriculum*. Merritt, J. E. (ed.) Ward Lock. London, 1971.

"This brief appraisal of four new media, three colour codes and i.t.a., shows that each has certain advantages over the use of ordinary T.O., although the advantages vary between the media. Any teacher who is convinced that the irregularities of the traditional spelling system of English are a hindrance to children who are learning to read and write would be failing in his professional capacity if he omitted to examine these approaches carefully. If the teacher also considers it important to find a simplified encoding system for children, if he wishes to encourage children's free writing from the beginning and to provide opportunities for individualised discovery methods of learning, he cannot fail to note that i.t.a. fulfils those criteria while the colour codes do not set out to do this."

There are three points arising from this quotation which deserve further comment. Firstly, it is interesting to observe that Southgate finds it necessary to qualify her own initial conclusion about the disadvantages of T.O. by giving deference to the beliefs of teachers. It was stressed in the previous section that teachers will be most successful in doing what they believe is right for them. It would seem regrettable, however, that there must be many tens of thousands of teachers still teaching beginners to read through the medium of T.O. simply because they are not aware of the difficulties and problems it can bring to many children.

The second point worthy of note is that Southgate makes a separate and distinct reference to encoding or writing. Whether reading and writing should be taught together from the beginning, or whether reading should precede writing by some specified period of time would seem to depend upon the views of the teacher and the requirements of the individual child—research results are not very forthcoming on this issue. But Southgate is emphatic about the relationship between free writing and i.t.a. Elsewhere[18], commenting on a class that had been using i.t.a., she says: "Free writing in the class appeared more spontaneous, prolific and correctly spelt than is usual with such young children." This last conclusion has been amply confirmed by other research evidence[19].

The final point is one of great significance. Informal, child-centred, individualised discovery methods are increasingly being used in infant and primary schools today, and may well be successful with subjects such as mathematics and science where there are many regular rules to be discovered by the eager highly-motivated child. But what "regular rules" are there to be learned in reading and writing the English

[18] Southgate, V. "Augmented Roman Alphabet Experiment. An Outsider's Report." *Educational Review* 16, 1, 1963.

[19] Block, J. R. "But Will They ever Lern to Spel Korectly?" *Educational Research*, 14, 3, 1972.

language? Again, Southgate drives the point home: "If the written form of our language represented a one-to-one relationship between written symbol and spoken sound, we might have a reasonable basis for hoping that, by heuristic methods, children could be encouraged to discover these relationships and so form generalisations. But our spelling system actually prevents children from making generalisations[50]." Southgate, in fact, demonstrates just how discouraging and frustrating it must be for children who attempt to form "rules" or mental concepts when learning in T.O. Merritt[51] takes this idea even further and suggests there is a relationship between the difficulties that many children must have, and the experimental neurosis which can be induced in animals. "In both cases," he says, "there has been some initial learning and this has broken down when the discriminations have proved too difficult, too confusing." He also gives some examples of the illogicalities of T.O. and adds: "If one were deliberately to design a situation for trying to induce experimental neurosis one could scarcely do better than use the beginning reading situation as a model." In his view, the only consolation is that "the presence of a teacher who is warm in manner and methodical in approach makes an appreciable difference."

The case against the use of T.O. for teaching beginners to read would seem to be irrefutable. And once again the solution is already available. Almost any change in the present orthography would be better than none, and without doubt the sooner the change is made the better for all children concerned. Some of the advantages of i.t.a. over other schemes for improving T.O. for the beginning of reading, mentioned by Southgate, have already been quoted. The Schools Council's *Independent Evaluation of i.t.a.*[52] listed other advantages and some disadvantages. Most of the latter, however, must also be listed as shortcoming of any scheme to improve T.O., and the fact that in any case they can be overcome has been proved by the many thousands of teachers at present using i.t.a.[53] One listed disadvantage needs specific mention. No changed medium can work without a sufficiency of books and materials in that medium for the teacher to use. In this respect, there is a considerable

[50] Southgate, V. "The Importance of Structure in Beginning Reading" in *Reading Skills: Theory and Practice*. Gardner, K. (ed.) Ward Lock. London, 1970.

[51] Merritt, J. E. "Reading Failure." (Paper read at U.K.R.A. Conference 1971.)

[52] Warburton, F. W. and Southgate, V. *i.t.a.: An Independent Evaluation*. John Murray and W. & R. Chambers. London. 1969.

[53] The i.t.a. Foundation has received many letters from teachers giving evidence of their outstanding success with i.t.a. The Appendix quotes, with permission, a letter written by a Headmistress to the Secretary of State, D.E.S.

difference between the media using colour and/or diacritical marks and i.t.a. The former have only a limited range of materials available, mostly related specifically to their own particular scheme; i.t.a., however, is applicable to any beginning reading scheme and a vast range of supplementary books and materials is now available in the medium.

The possibility that at some future time an even more advantageous medium than i.t.a. might be invented, cannot of course be ruled out. Warburton and Southgate[54] were aware of this point. Having reviewed both research and verbal evidence they conclude:

> "Although the two kinds of evidence on which this report was based were evaluated by means of different techniques, by two people whose backgrounds, interests and beliefs were far from identical, the conclusions proved to be fairly consistent and to lead broadly in the same direction—that is, towards a favourable impression of i.t.a. as a means of beginning reading with infants."

They then continue:

> "However, the authors considered that it would be unfortunate if the generally favourable tone of their report were taken to imply that the use of i.t.a. for beginning reading with infants was the final and only solution. They were conscious that only one new medium had been compared with certain traditional ways of using T.O., and that other media or other ways of using T.O. might be found to be equally or even more effective than i.t.a."

This last reference to "other ways of using T.O." partially negates their own very thorough and painstaking work. It also ignores the conclusions drawn by Southgate quoted above and the results of other comparative studies that have been carried out. Nevertheless, their main point is a sound one, and worthy to be considered, although their only recommendation was a plea for yet more research.

What they have overlooked is the fact that during the years while the "large scale" and "fundamental" research they recommend must first be financed and then carried out[55], and while the world awaits the conclusion whether any improvement has been found and whether it is significantly more effective, there are hundreds of thousands of children in each yearly age group who now pass through the English Education system still emerging as very poor or non-readers.

[54] Warburton, F. W. and Southgate, V. *i.t.a.: An Independent Evaluation.* John Murray and W. & R. Chambers. London, 1969.

[55] Like other research recommendations, no action to implement this has yet been taken.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is appreciated that research on many of the details of early language is still required, one of the main themes of this paper is that *solutions to the major problems of beginning reading are already known.* In general, there has been a sufficiency of research, and what is now wanted is *action* to implement the results already obtained. This action is needed in three areas: in helping to make good the severe deficiencies in oracy that exist in so many children *before* they come to school; in ensuring that teachers, both at the initial level and in service, are given better training in teaching beginners to read and are made aware of the results that research has already supplied; and finally, that steps are taken without delay to draw the attention of all concerned with education and of all parents to the problems that are caused by continuing to use T.O. to teach beginners to read, and that encouragement be given for the use of proven alternatives.

It is necessary to stress that these three areas, although they can be considered independently, are clearly related. The oracy of a child's home is certainly a concern of the teacher, for if a child comes to school with little or no competence in his knowledge or understanding of language, then the teacher must first make up this deficiency before he can begin to teach him to read. Regretfully, even by the age of five, so much damage has been done to the child's mental development that the teacher faces an uphill task. Regretfully also, many teachers leave their training colleges not merely unaware of this problem, but hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with it.

It is also not generally appreciated by teachers that the medium through which beginning instruction in reading is given can and should be considered quite independently of the methods, materials and procedures they actually employ for this task. The fact that some attempts to overcome the deficiencies of T.O. are themselves tied to a particular reading scheme certainly does not help to clarify the situation for the practising teacher, but this elementary fact is seldom made clear to students under training. Indeed, the various methods and approaches which can be used for teaching beginners to read may or may not even have been discussed during initial training. Sometimes a College lecturer's own inclinations or infatuations are passed on as never to be forgotten gospel, but only too often the new teacher is left to his own devices to discover what is best or appropriate. It may well be that at any rate in his decision to continue to use T.O. as the initial learning medium, the much-vaunted autonomy of the teacher can itself be an obstacle to reform. In any case, the central figure relating these three sets of factors concerning children's learning to read is the teacher.

A number of positive suggestions for action, largely stemming from the results of research over the past decade or two, have been made.

These have been concernd with early language development, with the improvement of teacher education and with the medium for beginning reading. The need for action is urgent, but it is believed that all the suggestions made can be instituted without delay and with not too great an increase in the educational budget. It is appreciated that many of the suggestions in fact require a considerable change in attitude on the part of many teachers, and indeed some other educationists, but it is to be hoped that the Committee will respect the fact that the time for finding out is past and that only deliberate action urgently undertaken will improve the reading, and hence the general educational level, of a very large number of the future citizens of this country.

25th October, 1972

APPENDIX

Kingsleigh First School,
Hadow Road,
BOURNEMOUTH.

25th April, 1972

The Right Hon. Margaret Thatcher, M.P.,
Minister of Education,
Department of Education and Science,
London W1Y 8AA.

Dear Minister,

I have read with interest reports of your concern about declining reading standards in many of our schools, and of your proposal to appoint a special committee to enquire into the teaching of reading to young children.

As the Head Teacher of a First School of some four hundred and seventy pupils I have made a special study of reading progress within my school during the past decade; and contrary to what appears to be a general trend I find that the children are reading more fluently and with more enthusiasm than ever before.

In 1964 at the suggestion of the Director of Education for Bournemouth my staff and I agreed to experiment by using the Initial Teaching Alphabet in our reception classes. At the end of two years we reviewed carefully the advantages and disadvantages of introducing reading to our children through this new medium. I found that every teacher was emphatic in her decision not to return to teaching through traditional orthography. Each reported happier children working more purposefully,

and in consequence almost no discipline problems within the classroom. Since then I estimate that we have taught upwards of one thousand children to read fluently using i.t.a. We begin systematic teaching at rising five, introducing phonics in the first term and working an organised integrated day. We rarely have a non-reader at seven, and even our very slow learners are confident and eager to progress. I am besieged whenever I enter a classroom by children who are bursting to read aloud to me. By the time our pupils reach their last year in this school the vast majority are reading fluently having changed to traditional orthography. They have a tested reading age well above their chronological age. Even more pleasing is the fact that they love books and are able to use the reference library confidently to discover information for themselves. I find that parents are expressing a preference for schools in the area using i.t.a. and in ten years I do not recall any criticism of our teaching methods from our parents. We have their wholehearted support in all that we do.

I wish that it were possible for you to visit the classrooms in this school to see for yourself how our young children apply themselves to their reading. We should be very proud indeed if you were able to do so.

In my opinion it would be a service to education if more schools could be persuaded to introduce their teaching of reading through the medium of i.t.a.

Yours faithfully,

(Sgd.) F. M. COAR (Miss),

Headmistress.